

Parent's Guide

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A Word to Parents... ▲

Advertising and Your Child has been prepared for the parents of the 43 million U.S. youngsters between two and 12 years old. It is estimated that children in this nation watch an average of 3.5 hours of television every day, the equivalent on an annual basis of a **50-day marathon** of TV viewing. For pre-teen youngsters, "prime time" does not mean "Roseanne" and "Cheers." Instead, children are most likely to settle down in front of the television to take in the exploits of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles or the Ghostbusters. Much of this viewing by children takes place on weekday afternoons and Saturday mornings, when parents are at work or even asleep.

American children wield substantial clout as consumers, due in part to the fact that parents give their offspring an estimated **\$6 billion** each year in allowances. The fast-rising spending power of U.S. children does not end with their direct purchases of candy, fast food, music cassettes, video games and clothing items; one Texas A&M researcher has calculated that youths also exert a substantial influence over the parental decision-making that goes into the buying of household items worth \$50 billion. Most parents remain unaware that their small children now qualify as big business for advertisers. This may be due to the fact that much of the television viewing by children goes largely unmonitored by their elders. "Latch-key" children make their own television-viewing decisions after the last school bell, when they are home alone during weekday afternoons.

It is in this connection that the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) of the Council of Better Business Bureaus (CBBB) strives to help adults who are responsible for the development of children. CARU was founded in 1974 and has as its mission the promotion of truthful, accurate advertising to children under the age of 12. We recognize that the special nature and needs of this youthful audience require particular care and diligence on our part and that of advertisers. To this end, we recently revised the **CARU Self-Regulatory Guidelines for Children's Advertising**,

which are discussed at the end of ***Advertising and Your Child***.

CARU is primarily devoted to encouraging advertising that is truthful and sensitive to the uniquely impressionable child audience. Promoting compliance with CARU guidelines is an important part of protecting youngsters. However, nothing can take the place of the important role parents play in educating their children to evaluate information and make informed choices. In essence, ***Advertising and Your Child*** has been developed to help parents help themselves-- and their children-- in this process.

Helping Your Child to Think About Advertising ▲

Television can be an important learning tool for your children, but it must be used with the greatest care. As part of the television "picture," advertising can provide your children with a great deal of information about the world around them. Advertising also may be a child's first introduction to what it means to be a consumer in the U.S. economy. Ads can help a child appreciate the diversity of available choices, and how to select wisely from among them. But, it must always be remembered that children need close parental guidance when it comes to advertising.

Advertising and Your Child is intended to help parents understand what may be appropriate or inappropriate advertising for their youngsters. It also provides adults with strategies for helping children help themselves to understand and evaluate advertising.

It is useful with very young children to start by talking about the general concept of advertising. For the purposes of such a discussion, parents may want to clip and then refer to magazine or newspaper ads for starters. Show your child such a print ad and ask:

- What do you notice first when you look at this ad?
- What is pretty or ugly about this ad?
- What product is this ad for?
- How does that ad make you feel about the product?
- What questions should you ask before buying this product? (Encourage your child to seek more information than the ad contains. How is the product used? Does it work well? Do you really need this particular product? What other comparable products are available and at what cost?)

This line of questioning is guaranteed to spark a lively discussion! More importantly, it will serve to start your child out on the path to wise consuming. Children should know that the purpose of advertising is to get people interested in buying products, not to entertain the viewer or reader. Extend these discussions to television advertising. Talk about the ways in which the product is made attractive on the television screen. Assist your child in identifying the claims made in the ad and then sort the statements into two categories: fact and opinion. Ask your child to consider which of the claims can be "proven" and which cannot.

Marking Commercials ▲

When your children watch television, be sure that they know when the commercials start and stop. Young children may consider the commercial to be part of the program, so it is a good idea to "mark" the commercials for them. At the beginning of a commercial, say:

"Oh it's a commercial. After the commercials, we'll be able to go back to the story."

Help your child to recognize when the commercial starts. There will be a brief "black-out" or other indication of the shift from program to commercial. There is an announcement: "We'll be right back to our program after this . . ."

Explaining How Ads Work ▲

Parents should strive to keep their discussions about advertisements on a level that their children will understand. To do this, use terms, analogies and concepts with which your child already is familiar. For example, you may wish to say that:

- ***Advertising makes a product into a "star."*** A commercial dresses up the product, puts make-up on it, shines bright lights on it, and makes it look larger than life. The advertiser hopes that the commercial will make consumers want to have the "star" in their home.
- ***Advertising makes a product "stand out in a crowd."*** It's difficult to be seen in a large crowd; things tend to get lost and blend in together. However, if one person in the crowd is wearing a brightly-colored outfit, or a large hat, that person will stand out. An advertiser wants its product to stand out in your mind, and, as a result, highlights the product in a way that attracts attention. One way to demonstrate this is to take your child to the supermarket. Ask your child to point to the boxes, cans or bags that feature artwork that is the most noticeable on the shelf. Packaging is one type of advertising for products.
- ***Advertising is like a "bicycle reflector."*** A commercial works like a reflector on the back of a bicycle at night; it makes the product more visible, so that it can't be missed.

The Rest of the Story ... ▲

Children should learn that advertising gives them some, but not all of the information needed to make informed choices. Help your child to understand that product information does not come from advertising exclusively and that a commercial is only an "introduction," not the whole story.

How can you help your child learn to investigate products before making a decision about a purchase? The best way for parents to make this point is to lead through personal example. Involve your child in the decisions about family purchases, from clothing to appliances. Let your child see how you weigh the relative merits of particular brands. Help your child in making similar decisions when it comes to even minor toy and entertainment purchases.

Reality Checks ▲

Whenever and wherever possible, parents should share in their children's TV viewing and urge them to discuss and think critically about what they are seeing. When viewing commercials, talk about the various elements which may make them deceptive or misleading. These discussions need not create cynics nor inevitably lead to the conclusion that all advertising is suspect. Instead, "reality checks" can foster responsible decision-making behavior in growing children.

Suppose you and your young children see a TV ad for a "900" teleprogram featuring a talking unicorn. The commercial might sound something like this:

"Hi, kids! I 'm Ursula and I live in a magical land with lots of other magical friends. I

want to talk to you and be your friend, too. You can call me here and I'll tell you all about my magical adventures."

A voice-over then interrupts with the words:

"\$1. 75 the first minute; \$1.00 each additional minute. Kids, get your parent 's permission."

After the commercial, do a "reality check" with your children to help them distinguish between reality and fantasy. For example:

- Are there really unicorns?
- Can animals really talk?
- If we call the "900" number, do you think you'll really talk to the unicorn? What do you think will happen when you call? Will you hear a story about a unicorn?
- How long is a minute? (Then you can time something to find out.) If you can buy three story books for the cost of this one telephone call, would you rather keep the books or just listen to the phone for a few minutes?

Asking these questions and having your children think about the answers will spur them to analyze advertising and products on their own. More generally, this process also should help to build your child's self-confidence and sense of competence when it comes to making decisions. To keep your child on this positive path, encourage him or her to bring to you any questions about ads that are viewed when you are not present.

Make It Real For Your Child ▲

Parents also can help their children judge the reality behind the images in advertising by encouraging them to draw upon their personal experiences. For example, take an advertisement showing a child performing tricks on a particular brand of skateboard. Ask your child:

"If you bought that skateboard, do you think you would be able to do the tricks the boy in the ad is doing?"

"How long do you think he had to practice before he could do them?"

"What do you think would happen if you tried to do those stunts without practicing first?"

After viewing this type of an ad, talk with your child about a skill or activity that he or she has attempted to master. Whether it is staying within the lines of a coloring book or riding a two-wheeler without training wheels, reminding your child just how much work and practice was needed in order to become better at the activity will help your youngster identify realistic (and unrealistic) claims in advertising. Your child will be less likely to be misled into thinking that particular equipment, foods, or clothing can provide short-cuts to greater proficiency, self-esteem or social acceptance.

The following are additional strategies for drawing your child into the process of examining advertisements:

1. Red Light/Green Light ▲

Distinguish the fantasy from the reality in a television commercial by marking it with a "red light." This might be accomplished by uttering the phrase "red light!" or holding up a drawing of a traffic light.

2. Stepping Out ▲
Identify a product you have seen advertised on TV and then visit a store that has the product. Compare the television version with the actual product. Ask your child: How are they different? Which is more exciting?
3. A Star Is Born ▲
Choose a product in your home, and make it "a TV star." Put the product in a box and "dress it up" as if it were going to appear on a real television. Use crayons or markers to decorate the box; shine a flashlight on the product, etc. This exercise helps your child understand the **process** of advertising and how products can be enhanced by various advertising techniques.
4. Keep a Log ▲
Monitor the types of commercials that appear on children's programming. Help your child keep a record of how many of each type (food, toys and clothing) are shown in a given period of time.
5. Watch Your Language ▲
Look for words that come up again and again in advertising. See if your child can find particular words that are used for particular types of products, like "delicious" for cereal, or "beautiful" for dolls.
6. Who's That Girl? ▲
Identify the spokesperson for the product and encourage your child to speculate about why an advertiser may have chosen that particular person. How is the product made more attractive or interesting by virtue of its association with the spokesperson?
7. What's the Story? ▲
Break the commercial down into the parts of its "story." Ask your child to decide which elements of the story provide information about the product and which parts are not relevant to a purchasing decision. Encourage your child to list the things he or she still needs to know after seeing the commercial.
8. Junior "Ad Agency" ▲
When your child has grown comfortable with thinking about how advertisements work, ask him or her to draw and color a series of ads for a list of products, such as a breakfast cereal, dump truck, bicycle, doll and board game. Ask your child why he or she decided to present products in certain ways? What was highlighted? Are "facts or opinions" used in the ads?

Educators report that one of the most effective ways to teach children is to involve the youngsters directly in the subject that is at hand. By encouraging your children to put themselves "in the shoes" of the makers of products and their advertisers, you open up a new and exciting way for your children to think and make informed decisions. The exercises suggested here should help your children to sit up, pay attention and decide for themselves about advertisements that appear on television or in newspapers and magazines.

About CARU ▲

The Children's Advertising Review Unit of the Council of Better Business Bureaus was established in 1974 by the advertising industry to promote responsible national advertising to children and to respond to public concerns. The central mission of CARU is the review and evaluation of child-directed advertising in all media. When children's advertising is found to be misleading, inaccurate or inconsistent with its Guidelines, CARU seeks changes through the voluntary cooperation of

advertisers.

CARU provides a general advisory service for advertisers and agencies. It also is a clearinghouse source of information for children, parents and educators. CARU actively encourages advertisers to develop and promote the dissemination of educational messages to children consistent with the Children's Television Advertising Act of 1990. CARU maintains an extensive collection of research on children's advertising and has published an annotated bibliography of the same.

About CARU's Guidelines ▲

The ***CARU Self-Regulatory Guidelines for Children's Advertising*** provide a basis for evaluating child-directed advertising. These guidelines are based on six underlying principles:

- Children's limited capacity for evaluating information dictates that advertisers have a special responsibility to protect young children from their own susceptibilities.
- Advertisers should be careful not to exploit unfairly children's imaginative qualities to create unrealistic expectations for their products.
- Advertisers should recognize that children may learn practices from advertising that may affect their health and well-being.
- Recognizing the potential of advertising to influence behavior, advertisers should provide examples of positive and beneficial social behavior.
- Advertising should avoid social stereotyping and appeals to prejudice.
- Although many influences affect a child's personal and social development, it remains the prime responsibility of the parents to provide guidance for children. Advertisers should contribute to this parent-child relationship in a constructive manner.

How to Complain About Children's Ads ▲

With the thousands of advertisements for children that exist at any given point in time, it is inevitable (though still unfortunate) that some run afoul of the self-regulatory standards of the Children's Advertising Review Unit. If the ad that comes to your attention is local in nature, contact your local Better Business Bureau. The BBB will intervene directly with the advertiser in seeking to resolve the complaint.

National advertising comes under the scope of CARU. Such ads promote goods or services on a national or broad regional basis. (For example, a difference here in terms of children's advertising might be a department store on the local level and a specific toy on the national level) Keep in mind the following:

- Please put your complaint in writing.
- Be specific about where and when you saw or heard the advertising. If it is a printed ad, please send the original ad (or a copy) with your letter.
- Address your complaint to:

**Children's Advertising Review Unit
70 West 36th Street
New York, NY 10018**

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